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FAITH AS AN EFFORT OF THE SOUL.

(Heb. 11:1.)

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AS HAS been frequently remarked, this passage is not a definition of faith. But, unfortunately, it has been almost universally treated as if it were such. All science and philosophy seek to *define*; the definition is their most finished and perfect product. And most commentators have written on this text of Scripture as if there were lying behind it a whole region of philosophical truth. As we follow them in their remarks on the passage, we soon find ourselves in that rarer atmosphere of early metaphysical thought from which the inspired writings elsewhere are remarkably free. We leave the highway of true expository study when we begin, perhaps almost unconsciously, to treat this saying as a definition, as a self-contained truth which can be isolated and inquired into, probed and analyzed. In reality it is a statement of an entirely different order; it is illuminative because of the flow of thought which passes through it; sever its connections with its context and it becomes itself sorely in need of an illumination.

It is true that this saying may be described as a monumental utterance, and in that respect it possesses all the striking features of a definition. It rises up suddenly, almost precipitously, above the surrounding context; there is something about it that attracts our attention at once. The "loftiness" of the saying, if we may use such an expression, wins our notice. There is a great mass of truth in these few words, more than in the verses that precede or those that follow. All these are characteristics of a definition. This verse interrupts the smooth flow of thought: Heb. 10:39 and 11:2 are on the same level, but not 10:39 and 11:1, or 11:1, 2. We feel ourselves brought to a standstill, we

find ourselves inquiring as to the meaning of the presence of this saying here, a saying of so different a character and style from those which are found in the immediate context. We ask: What is the writer's object in making such a statement as this? And the discovery of an answer to this question is the proper point from which to begin an elucidation of the passage. It is the first explanation required, and it had better be treated as the first difficulty. Frequently it has been left to the last, and even then sometimes no effort has been made to solve it. The philosophical definition has been expounded, but the object of the writer in introducing such a definition here, and the purpose it serves, the reader has had to try to discover for himself.

We have already said that this passage is not a definition of faith. We would go still farther and remark that a reader must have his definition more or less formulated before he can understand the statement at all; he must know what faith is, before he can comprehend the truth contained in this passage. To quote it to some earnest soul groping after the truth as it is in Jesus as a definition of the faith that saves would be a waste of breath. Or let any scholar, ignorant of the nature of the Christian's faith and curious to learn, turn to this passage for instruction. If he read it, "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the proving of things not seen," it would certainly not supply him with the information he wanted, for it would give him no hint as to the essence of faith. If he read it, "faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen," we venture to think the saying would be a complete mystery to him. The passage is evidently meant for the man who has had some experience of what faith is, but has missed some particular and important phase of it. And the object of the writer was to bring this neglected or forgotten feature to the attention of his readers. What was this phase of faith which they had missed?

This question may be best answered by a reference to the general contents of the epistle to the Hebrews. For all through it the writer has in view the faith of his readers, and the picture has been transferred from his mind's eye to the pages of his manuscript, and can be easily discovered there by the most

casual observer, together with its companion picture of the more perfect faith with which he wishes to inspire his readers. On this subject we may fitly quote the words of Dr. Warfield, in his article on "Faith" in Hastings' *Bible Dictionary*. He says, with reference to the epistle to the Hebrews: "The danger against which, in the providence of God, he [the writer of the epistle] was called upon to guard the infant flock, was not that it should fall away from faith to works, but that it should fall away from faith into despair. His readers were threatened, not with legalism, but with shrinking back, and he needed therefore to emphasize not so much the object of faith as the duty of faith." These last words give us an answer to our question. The purpose of the writer is to arouse in his readers a consciousness of the duty of faith. Perhaps some words of Dr. Dale in his sermon on "Faith in God and Christ" will serve to illustrate the point. "Faith in God—faith in Christ—is in its final form an act of the will: it is a moral act: it is not an emotion, an impression, the result of considerations which act upon a man from without; it is an act in which he exercises moral choice. To have faith we must will to have it." In fact, Dr. Dale's sermon is in many respects a modern rendering of the epistle to the Hebrews. It is an appeal to conscience, to all that is highest and best in man, supported by a reference to a past of glorious records, an exhorting of men to arouse themselves, to take a firmer grip on the new gospel, to hold fast to the new-found faith. Faith is regarded in this epistle, as well as in Dr. Dale's sermon, as an act of the will. And, therefore, the epistle differs perhaps from every other portion of the New Testament in conception, thought, and style. If you desire to rouse a man to new spiritual energy, you do not, as a rule, instruct him, you appeal to him; you do not deal in arguments, but rather in illustrations and examples. If you have to give him information or teaching, it must be as brief as possible. What he needs is a renewal of his spiritual vigor. A close study of the style of this epistle will reveal it to be an almost perfect specimen of such a method of treatment. It was the condition of the readers, the need there was of rousing them to fresh faith, which

determines the choice of subject, the course of reasoning, the continual reference to the past, the frequent introduction of personal appeals, the literary style, and the insertion of the chapter of which the passage we are now considering forms the preface.

Then the question we wish to answer is: How does the statement in Heb. 11:1 help toward this end? As a definition of a more or less philosophical character it does not help at all. Can we find any better interpretation of the passage, by which it may be seen to be in harmony with the writer's purpose to arouse his readers to a firmer and more constant faith?

It is, of course, evident that there is a close connection between the first and the remaining verses of chap. 11, that the one gives the general statement, while the others supply the particular examples of its truth in history and experience. Therefore some consideration of the whole chapter is likely to help us in understanding its first verse. In such a general study of the chapter and its significance there are two passages which serve to bind securely at the beginning and the end the numerous threads which are woven together in the record, the deeds and characters of different men, and thus to save us from a bewildering entanglement and confusion. They are, *ἐν ταύτῃ γὰρ ἐμαρτυρήθησαν οἱ πρεσβύτεροι* (5:2) and *οὗτοι πάντες μαρτυρήντες διὰ τῆς πίστεως* (5:39). Following the Revised Version, we translate *ἐμαρτυρήθησαν* "to have witness borne to one." It is to be noted that whenever this word is used in the epistle it has reference to the divine record contained in the Scriptures. Abel's righteousness is witnessed by God in the Scriptures (11:4). God witnesses in the Scriptures concerning our Lord: *Ὅτι σὺ ἱερεὺς εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα* (7:17). So in the Scriptures the witness is borne of Melchizedek that he liveth (7:8). And in 10:15 a quotation from Scripture which contains a revealed truth concerning God is introduced with the words: *Μαρτυρεῖ δὲ ἡμῖν καὶ τὸ Πνεῦμα τὸ Ἅγιον*. So that we do not think we shall be far wrong if we understand by "the witness that is borne" in 11:2, 39, the witness of sacred history to the characters and lives and deeds of these men. Now, the contents of that history were determined by the presence or absence of faith. If a man had

no faith, then it mattered not what position he occupied, how brilliant and accomplished he was, how estimable his life and character, the Scriptures have little or nothing to say about him. It simply did not come within their province to deal with him at all. On the other hand, if a person had faith, though it might be only Rahab the harlot, or the little-known parents of Moses, yet that faith might secure for them a place in the sacred record. It was through their faith "that they had witness borne to them." Yet again and in another fashion the contents of Scripture are determined by faith. The actions which are recorded are those actions in a man's life of which faith is the motive power, the actions which are expressive of the faith of his soul. Joseph was a king's chief minister, yet little is told us of the services he rendered to the state, and in this chapter nothing at all; here reference is only made to that which was in his life the outcome of his faith in God's word (11:22). "Therein"—in respect to their faith—the men of old had witness borne to them. The Bible contains the history, the sayings, the songs of *faithful* men. It is the book of God's promises and also the book of man's faith. For the two must go together, and together they make religion.

This latter truth is the one which is emphasized and illustrated in this eleventh chapter. The writer's assertion that the various achievements mentioned in the chapter were accomplished by faith seems in some instances somewhat daring, and at first appears almost an unwarranted assumption. That the fully developed faith of the New Testament is meant is, of course, impossible. The faith of chap. 11 must be taken in a broader sense, as simply an effort on the part of man's spiritual nature toward God, which has its result in various different forms, the essence of the faith, however, consisting in the making of the effort. God reveals himself and speaks his promises, but man must do his part. It may take the outward form of a sacrifice, of the building of an ark, of the offering up of an only child, or of the saving of a little one from death by love's wise plan. But however much it may vary in form and in practice, in spirit it is the same in every case. It is an effort on man's

part by which he turns to God. It is, as it were, a going forth to meet God half way. Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, the patriarchs, Moses, Rahab, Samuel, David, however much they differed in other respects, were alike in this: when God spoke, they made an effort to hear his voice; when he revealed himself to them, they made an effort to see his face; when he promised, they responded by stretching out the hand to receive that which he had to give them. The lives of the heroes of chap. 11 were full of *active* faith. This same effort of the soul directed toward God is faith in its simplest and most universal form, the faith which finds its fullest expression in the saving faith of the man who trusts in Christ, but which was no less present in the primitive faith of Abel. It was just this feature of faith which needed emphasis for the Hebrew readers of this letter; they lacked the strenuous effort of the man of faith, in his response to God. They needed to learn how the contents of their sacred Scriptures were determined by the presence or absence of this faith; how without such faith religion would not be, God's promises would not be, things hoped for would not be, things unseen would be things unknown. Thus the chapter is prefaced with these words, "Ἔστι δὲ πίστις ἐλπιζομένων ὑπόστασις, πραγμάτων ἔλεγχος οὐ βλεπομένων.

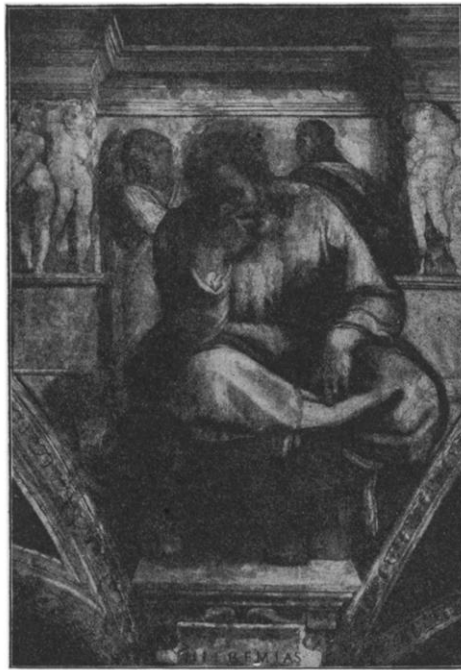
How, then, does this exposition of the chapter help us to understand the difficult expression, *ἐλπιζομένων ὑπόστασις*? The Revised Version translates *ὑπόστασις* "assurance." But "the assurance of things hoped for" is a very awkward expression, and the nature of the genitive is by no means easy to determine. Bishop Westcott in his *Commentary* has no hesitation in fixing the meaning as "essence," which he defines as "that which gives real existence to a thing." We prefer the definition of essence supplied by him in his note on Heb. 1:3, "that in virtue of which a thing is what it is." Interpreting the word thus in the passage before us, the former portion of the passage may be expounded in some such way as this: Things hoped for cannot be without faith; it is faith which makes them what they are; without faith they may be something else—interesting words or beautiful dreams or attractive speculations—but they cannot be

things hoped for. Does not general experience prove the truth of this assertion? Faith is the very essence of hope. We invariably hope because we have faith in someone or in something. The man without faith is always a pessimist. We cannot give hope to any poor despairing mortal till we give him faith. Simply to bid him "be hopeful" will seem to him a mockery of words. But this is not quite what this writer says. Faith he declares to be the essence of *things hoped for*, not of *hope*. And this form of statement is adopted with the set purpose of making plain to the readers their responsibility. God has done his part; the things hoped for do exist, as far as he is concerned; the promises are spoken, written down. And yet it is absolutely essential that man should do *his* part too, if these promises of God, these revelations of God, are to become in very truth "things hoped for." If he does not, they will remain something infinitely poorer. It is a mere platitude that where there is no hope there are no things hoped for. Man's faith brings "things hoped for" into being, makes them what they really are. When that faith is wanting, what is the result? A man is passing through a season of spiritual doubt, faith has almost gone from his soul. The promises of God are still before him, they are read by him, but what are they? Empty words, and yet capable in their very emptiness of echoing a sweet music which is torture to him; the thought of heaven, of holiness, of eternal joy, is a mockery to him, and yet a mockery that saddens him. The things hoped for by the church, by the believer, are there indeed—he is all too conscious of that—but to him without faith they are not things hoped for at all, something very different. Or a church is passing through a season of spiritual indolence; in its prosperity and ease it slumbers the slumber that so often ends in death; its religion lacks virility, its members will not rouse themselves to active faith. How narrow then becomes the region of "things hoped for"! Rationalism and skepticism busy themselves with one after another of the church's bright visions and transform them into dim drab shadows. "Things hoped for" become first mere possibilities, and then despised and childish fancies. So, under different

circumstances, this writer speaks his message to the Hebrews: "If you are going to keep the things hoped for, you must rouse yourselves to faith, you must make the effort to believe, you must bid your souls be patient and endure."

In the other difficult expression, *πραγμάτων ἔλεγχος οὐ βλεπομένων*, we have naturally no hesitation in following Bishop Westcott and translating *ἔλεγχος* "proof." Unseen things belong to a different category from things hoped for. The latter are to be found in the subjective world of our souls, their existence does not require any proof, as soon as they are present they are perceived. The difficulty with them is to bring them into existence, to make them really things hoped for. With things unseen it is different. They do exist, outside and independent of ourselves (hence the introduction of *πραγμάτων*, not found in conjunction with *ἐλπιζομένων*). The difficulty is to become convinced of their existence. Invisibility deprives us of one of our most ordinary methods of proof; then what is to take its place? We answer faith, faith is proof. Not faith as contrasted with rationalism, not faith as contrasted with skepticism and doubt, but faith as expressing the energy of a man's soul, the highest form of activity of which he is capable. The man who simply remains passive and allows argument after argument and proof after proof to be pumped into his empty mind will never be quite sure of anything. Life for him will consist of a balancing of probabilities, a careful sifting of endless evidences, and engrossed in discussing the various *pros* and *cons* he will never arrive at certainty. In the region of apologetics we have many so-called "proofs," among others those of the divine existence. They are not really "proofs," they do not by themselves convince; everyone knows that the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews is correct when he declares faith to be the real proof. The divine existence was never made certain to any man by means of the so-called proofs alone. No man has been convinced of the existence of God until he has made a great effort of the soul, until he has longed and struggled to believe, "stretching lame hands of faith," not only fighting his doubts, but tearing himself away from them and turning resolutely to

the God he could not see. Then certainty came to him and not till then. So also is it with those who, knowing nothing of arguments and theological proofs, are yet certain of God's existence. To them the effort is an easy one, to turn to God comes natural to them. It is a simple faith that convinces them of the things unseen. Their conviction is as strong a one as if it were founded on masses of metaphysics, philosophy, and theology. "Faith is the proof of things unseen;" without faith, that effort of the soul, the things unseen are at their best dim shadows and mere dreams.



JEREMIAH.—*Michelangelo.*